

The University of Chicago

LAFCADIO HEARN, CRITIC OF
AMERICAN LIFE AND
LETTERS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1940

By
RAY McKINLEY LAWLESS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER II

CRITICISM OF MAJOR AUTHORS

When we begin to consider Hearn's views on American literature, we are at once aware that his criticism here is far less systematic than it is in the case of English and foreign literatures. Reasons for this fact are given in the introductory discussion.¹ It is safe to say that Hearn did not, in general, like American literature; that he did not consider it of much importance, since, he thought, it had not sufficiently developed to merit serious attention. On this last point he reflected the popular attitude of his time. As far back as 1880, in a newspaper article, Hearn was calling for a new American literature.² He said the lack of an international copyright discouraged American authors: "The buds of native originality . . . have been strangled by exotic growths."² Furthermore our novels do not picture enough of the life of the United States--the factory, the mill, the village--to be called American novels.³ Paradoxically, however, the tendency to picture common everyday American life, the tendency toward realism which he genuinely deplored, he considered another hampering influence to the fine development of good literature.⁴ His instinctive affinities guided him when he wrote to a friend: "Being of a meridional race myself, a Greek, I feel rather with the Latin races than with the Anglo-Saxon; and trust that

¹See supra, pp. 3-5. (This reference is to the complete dissertation, which is in the University of Chicago Libraries.)

²"Death of American Literature," New Orleans Item, December 31, 1880, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 62-64. The critical breadth of vision transcending all prejudices, the view which he expressed late in life, had not yet found development in his thought. (See supra, p. 10.)

³"Recent American Novels," New Orleans Item, June 18, 1881, in Hutson (ed.), Editorials of Lafcadio Hearn, pp. 147-49.

⁴"Realistic Fiction," New Orleans Times-Democrat, September 10, 1882, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 100-103.

with time and study I may be able to create something different from the stone-grey and somewhat chilly style of latter-day English and American romance."⁵ This stone-grey quality he felt to be the result of modern machine civilization, which, as he wrote to Chamberlain, stultified the creative imagination: "The world of electricity, steam, mathematics, is blank and cold and void. No man can ever write about it. Who can find a spark of romance in it?"⁶ Consequently our novelists have become fugitives, according to Hearn.

So it is not surprising when, late in life, he was called upon to teach literature in Japan, he should tell his students that "American literature really exists in a very small quantity,"⁷ and that out of more than three thousand pages of lectures, as printed in recent years, one finds fewer than two hundred pages devoted to American writers. Even so, we must not assume that Hearn dismissed American literature from his interests. From his early days in Cincinnati to almost the very end of his life in Japan, we find frequent and sometimes extended and discerning comment on the course of American letters. It is our problem now to examine in detail those comments, noting their extent and character.

First and Last Love: Edgar Allan Poe

Of major American authors who lived and died before 1850,⁸ the year of Hearn's birth, only one is ever discussed by Hearn. But that one--Edgar Allan Poe--was destined to receive more praise, early and late, than Hearn bestowed on any other American writer. When his interest in Poe began we do not know positively. It is

⁵Letter to John Albee, about 1883, in Writings, XIII, 269-70.

⁶Letter of December 14, 1893, in ibid., XVI, 84.

⁷Hearn, A History of English Literature, p. 923. Here Hearn is probably reflecting the opinion of Edmund Gosse, whom he very frequently mentioned in the section devoted to a discussion of American literature.

⁸It is to be noted that Hearn mentioned only one American writer, Philip Freneau, whose major work was done before the year 1800. This is a casual mention in a lecture on "Some Poems About Insects," where he quotes a part of the poem "Catty-did." (Hearn, On Poets, p. 407.)

barely possible that his first acquaintance was made at school in England.⁹ At any rate, he became an ardent lover of Poe early in his Cincinnati days.¹⁰ Late in life, in his lectures in Japan, Hearn remarked that "the American poets of real merit are very few; and none of them except Poe, rise to the very first rank--which Poe does only by virtue of about a dozen lyrics."¹¹

Hearn wrote a number of criticisms of Poe, or essays that included comment on Poe, in his American sojourn. One of the first of these was a long review of Poe's life, occasioned by the appearance of a new Poe biography by William F. Gill. In retelling the story of Poe's struggle as man and artist, Hearn relates the events in such a way that they parallel his own unhappy struggles--a manner of interpreting Poe which he continued to the end of his life.¹² Not long after this review he gave a discussion of Manet's illustrations for Poe's Raven, praising them as "daring and very odd specimens of Impressionism," but showing much less enthusiasm than for Doré's illustrations a few years later.¹³ Writing on "Nightmare and Nightmare Legends," he said that Poe must have used the content of his own horrible dreams in such stories as "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Fall of the House of Usher."¹⁴ An article on "Crimson Madness" brought out his belief that Poe's madness is evidenced in part by his "strange passion for the hue of crimson," found in most of his later tales in the images of crimson fires, crimson glass, crimson symptoms of disease, crimson curtains and walls, crimson moons,

⁹In Writings, XIII, 30-31, a footnote tells of Hearn's early love of literature; Longfellow is mentioned, though not Poe.

¹⁰As early as 1871, no doubt. Milton Bronner (ed.), Letters from the Raven, pp. 25-32, gives an account of this early interest. (See infra, pp. 28 ff.)

¹¹Hearn, On Poets, p. 777. The time of these lectures was late in the 1890's, possibly early in the 1900's.

¹²"Edgar Allan Poe," nearly four columns of fine print in the Cincinnati Commercial, July 13, 1877.

¹³"A Glimpse of the Impressionists," Cincinnati Commercial, September 1, 1877.

¹⁴New Orleans Item, August 4, 1878, in Mordell (ed.), An American Miscellany, II, 25-28.

and crimson shadows.¹⁵ An editorial on "A French Translation of Edgar Allan Poe" pointed out the stylistic difficulties of translating Poe, but praised Baudelaire's treatment as rather satisfactory because, Hearn said, the two writers were of similar nature.¹⁶ Another article, entitled "Doré's Raven," discussed the relative merits and demerits of the great French illustrator's work, which Hearn considered "astonishing in a two-fold sense: first by reason of its magnification of the poet's several fancies; secondly, because of his surprising interpretation of the theme as a whole."¹⁷ "He has solved the difficulty," said Hearn, "of translating the stanzas into the picture by treating The Raven as an inconsolable mourner's revery upon the vast and eternal Enigma of Death." He defended Doré in a correspondence with W. D. O'Connor:

So you think Doré's Raven a failure! I hope you are not altogether right . . . the longer I examined them [the plates], the more strongly they impressed me. . . . I must say that the terminal vignette with its Sphinx-death is one of the most terrible I have seen drawn.¹⁸

In an essay on "The Valley of Unrest" Hearn called Poe a "brilliant, versatile, eccentric genius . . . an uncomprehended enigma among men."¹⁹

Hearn's lecture in Japan had only favorable comment on Poe's verse. He spoke of his wide influence, due to his "wonderful sense of the value of words, of their peculiar colors and sounds, of their physiognomy, so to speak." And further:

His instinct in that direction led him especially toward the strange, the unfamiliar, the startling. . . . [His work] fascinates us by its strangeness and its grotesque force. . . . He introduced new ideas of melody into verse, especially by what has been called the "repetend."

¹⁵New Orleans Item, November 20, 1878, in Mordell (ed.), An American Miscellany, II, 39-42.

¹⁶New Orleans Item, October 22, 1879, in Hutson (ed.), Editorials, pp. 63-69.

¹⁷New Orleans Times-Democrat, December 2, 1883, in Mordell (ed.), An American Miscellany, II, 114-21. A previous short article by Hearn had announced that the famous illustrations were soon to appear and that America should be grateful to Doré for helping to rescue Poe from oblivion! ("Doré and Poe," New Orleans Times-Democrat, February 11, 1883.)

¹⁸Letter of March, 1885, in Writings, XIII, 311.

¹⁹New Orleans Times-Democrat, May 4, 1884, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 149-52.

Hearn discussed at some length this last feature and illustrated by quotations from "To Helen," "The Raven," and "The Bells," considering this last the most remarkable. Hearn looked upon Poe as an original poet in "the domain of the shadowy and the fearful. . . . Poe brought the ghoul into the modern western world of dreams and fears." Hearn said Poe's mind was Gothic in feeling, but he blended many old elements, a method characteristic of the romantics in France, Germany, and England. He concluded his discussion with an account of Poe's life, again paralleling the events of his own life.²⁰

When Hearn gave a brief discussion on the trend of American letters, at the end of his lectures on the history of English literature, he used one-third of his time on Poe.²¹ Having interpreted Poe's verse in an earlier lecture, he devoted his attention here to the prose, almost wholly to the tales. Again, we find the statement that Poe is the chief influence in American literature.²² Again, we find the garbled version of Poe's life, paralleling the events of Hearn's life.²³ Poe's tales are not important, he said, because of their didacticism, or their moral, or their humanity; but "the one thing which especially distinguishes the stories of Poe from the stories of any other writer" is the element of fear--dream fear and the fear of death. Hearn called "The Fall of the House of Usher" "nightmare absolute--perfect horror." The story "William Wilson," he said, "represents to some extent the history of Poe himself, self-destroyed by impulses over which he had no control." Hearn was lavish in his praise of the descriptive qualities of the stories. He said: "As a decorative artist Poe was certainly great. . . . These wondrous . . . chapters reflect the impressions which old Italian and Venetian

²⁰ Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from Hearn, On Poets, pp. 800-816. Poe's influence is again mentioned though briefly, in "Finnish Poetry in English Literature," On Poetry, pp. 112-13.

²¹ Seventeen out of fifty-one pages are on Poe, as "Notes on American Literature" are now reprinted in Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 923-74.

²² Ibid., p. 935.

²³ Ibid., pp. 933-35. Crofts has called attention to the Hearn-Poe identification.

art and history produced upon Poe's brain. . . . He saw everything shadowy and terrible." In this last respect he was comparable to Doré. Commenting further on the stories, he said: "Nothing more atrociously ugly than the story of 'The Black Cat' was ever written . . . it is saved from vulgarity only by the power of the horrible in it." As for "The Tell-Tale Heart," it "might have been written in a lunatic asylum,--indeed it pretends to be the story of a lunatic,--the confession of a madman and murderer." Hearn called the fragment "Silence" the "most perfect thing of its kind in literature." It realized the perfection of Hearn's dream of poetical prose, surpassing even Baudelaire.²⁴

This enthusiasm for Poe, however, does not apply to the whole body of his work. He reminded his students that Poe's stories were uneven in quality, that he lacked a sense of humor, that he "had suffered very much from the indiscretion of his editors," that much of his newspaper and magazine writings should never have been reprinted; and finally, Hearn frequently deplored his lack of scientific knowledge.²⁵ He dismissed Poe's criticism and essays as obsolete, "for they [the essays particularly] dealt with philosophical subjects that have received entirely new light from latter-day science. But the stories, which resemble no other stories in any other literature, have lost nothing by the lapse of time."²⁶

How thoroughly imbued Hearn was with the spirit of Poe for more than half his lifetime, is shown by certain facts besides his enthusiastic criticism. These facts do not constitute a part of his Poe criticism, but they help to explain his enthusiasm. This obsession began with his avid reading of Poe soon after com-

²⁴Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from "Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 936-45. In another lecture, "The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction," he commented on some details of nightmare experience in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Eleonora." (Hearn, On Art, Literature and Philosophy, pp. 122-23.)

²⁵Ibid., pp. 948-49.

²⁶Ibid., p. 935. Of the few books of American literature which Hearn had in his library in Japan, we find the ten-volume set of Poe in the Steadman-Woodberry edition (1894-1895), excepting Vols. VI-IX, the very ones which contain the criticism, essays, etc. It seems highly improbable that Hearn knew the criticism and essays. (See Catalogue of the Hearn Library, pp. 18-19.)

ing to Cincinnati. His old friend and employer, Henry Watkin, dubbed him the Raven, and Hearn was pleased with the nickname, using it even after going to New Orleans.²⁷ Notes exchanged with Watkin while Hearn was still in Cincinnati show this influence: on one occasion, coming to see Watkin and not finding him in, Hearn wrote: "Then I returned and crept to the door and listened to see if I could hear the beating of your hideous heart."²⁸ When Hearn was delayed in Memphis on his way to New Orleans, he wrote to Watkin, giving a description of his bleak hotel room in the Poe manner:

There is a great red daub on one wall as though made by a bloody hand when somebody was staggering down the stairway. . . . Spiders are busy spinning their dusty tapestries in every corner, and between the bannisters of the old stairways. The planks of the floor are sprung, and when I walk along the room at night it sounds as though Something or Somebody was following me in the dark.²⁹

Further letters, these from New Orleans, are signed with a drawing of a raven, and Hearn wrote amusingly in the third person of the Raven's adventures and difficulties.³⁰ A description of New Orleans in one letter is surely an echo of Poe: "I never beheld anything so beautiful and so sad. . . . It was like young death, --a dead bride crowned with orange flowers, --a dead face that asked for a kiss."³¹ Hearn was a follower of Poe in punctuation to such an extent that editors have used this stylistic device as evidence in identifying his newspaper articles.³² Tinker points out that Hearn's exotic library in New Orleans contained few Anglo-Saxon titles, but he did admit Poe (and Herbert Spencer!).³³

When we extend our observation to Hearn's publications, it becomes further evident that the Poe influence bulks large. The type of articles appearing in Cincinnati papers is striking evidence.³⁴ Of the "fantastics" published in the New Orleans Item

²⁷Bronner, Letters from the Raven, *passim*.

²⁸Ibid., p. 32. ²⁹Ibid., p. 37. ³⁰Ibid., pp. 68-70.

³¹Ibid., pp. 42-43.

³²Mordell (ed.), An American Miscellany, I, Introduction, lvi-lvii; and Hutson (ed.), Editorials, Introduction, p. xvi.

³³Lafcadio Hearn's American Days, p. 120.

³⁴A few titles will suffice to show this: from the Cincinnati Enquirer, "Mortuary Literature," January 12, 1873; "The

during 1879-1880, Hearn wrote his friend H. E. Krehbiel: "They are dreams of a tropical city. There is one twin-idea running through them all--Love and Death."³⁵ A letter from Japan in 1893, in which Hearn states a theory of beauty and sadness, shows the Poe influence is not forgotten: "What effect does the sudden sight of an extraordinarily beautiful person have upon you? I mean the very first. Is it not an effect of sadness? Analyze it; and perhaps you will find yourself involuntarily thinking of death."³⁶ His later volumes of tales and sketches in Japan, using many horror themes, indicate a "recession to the tastes of half-forgotten years . . . an obscure native predilection for macabre topics was reasserting itself."³⁷ To note a few examples. "Vespertina Cognita," from Exotics and Retrospectives (1898),³⁸ records a nightmare experience. "A Passional Karma," from In Ghostly Japan (1899),³⁹ tells a story of love and death of a beautiful maiden and a samurai youth. "Of a Promise Broken," from A Japanese Miscellany (1901),⁴⁰ is one of the weird, horror stories in which a bell announces the approach of the demon ghost. Practically all of the tales in Kwaidan (1904),⁴¹ Hearn's last collection of strange and weird sketches, are ghostly and shadowy, chiefly concerned with death and the dead, frequently showing a kind of weird beauty, grotesque and horrible. With reference to the sketches from these several volumes, Hearn may justly be called an Orientalized Poe. Small wonder, then, that the critical comments show a marked enthusiasm for Poe: the Poe influence is de-

Haunted and the Haunters," January 26, 1874; "Ghouls and Graveyards," March 1, 1874; and "Mad-House Horrors," January 10, 1875; from the Cincinnati Commercial, "Gibbeted," August 26, 1876; and "A Horror Haunted House," August 16, 1877.

³⁵Letter, of about 1880, in Writings, XIII, 211. The following titles from the "fantastics," later collected by Charles W. Hutson (ed.), Fantastics and Other Fancies (Boston, 1914), are suggestive: "The Black Cupid," "The Devil's Carbuncle," "The Ghostly Kiss," "Metempsychosis," "Vision of the Dead Creole," "A Dead Love."

³⁶To Hendrick, November, 1893, in Writings, XIV, 260-61.

³⁷Crofts, pp. 97-98. ³⁸Writings, IX, 193-204.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 257-58. ⁴⁰Ibid., X, 199-207.

⁴¹Ibid., XI, 157-267. See, further, the review of Kwaidan, by Ray M. Lawless, American Literature, II (May, 1930), 199-200.

cidedly dominant in much of Hearn's literary output which is not concerned with criticism. Poe amply illustrated the second and the fourth of Hearn's literary tenets--beauty as an ideal in art, and the romantic as opposed to the realistic interpretation of life. Furthermore, he felt that time had only strengthened his earlier judgments; thus did he justify the fifth point in his credo. If there is any modification of his opinions, from his first comments to his very last, it is merely a slightly lessened extravagance of expression of maturing years, but surely there is no lessening of genuine enthusiasm.

The New York Group: Irving, Cooper, Bryant

Since Hearn's interests seemed to have centered in the romanticism of the mid-nineteenth century and later, we can scarcely expect his writings to yield any important comments on the elder major writers. There are no essays or editorials, early or late, on Irving, Cooper, and Bryant; nor are there references to be found in the letters. In fact, except for a few perfunctory remarks in his "Notes on American Literature,"⁴² they scarcely attracted his attention at all. He called Bryant "a pale shadow of 18th century literature, [who] has given us a few lines of almost perfect verse in the poem 'Thanatopsis' and some other pieces; but his good work is so small in quantity that he can hardly be said to have done more than attempt to maintain a tradition."⁴³ In a lecture "On Birds in English Poetry," he praised "To a Waterfowl" for its musical verse and richly colored language; but he saw nothing significant in its thought. Bryant's idea of accounting for the homing instinct theologically, "after the fashion of the eighteenth century," appeared to Hearn altogether obsolete after the enlightening influence of evolutionary philosophy.⁴⁴ Cooper received even less consideration. He merely mentioned the five sea novels and the Leatherstocking series, with

⁴²Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 923-74.

⁴³Ibid., p. 927. A brief word of guarded praise is expressed also in "Some Poems on Death," On Poetry, pp. 318-20. The Catalogue of the Hearn Library, p. 54, shows but one slim volume of Bryant, in the "Riverside Literature Series."

⁴⁴Hearn, On Poetry, p. 540.

the observation that his historical novels "were very bad, and are now almost unread." Finally, Cooper "takes high rank only as a story-teller, not as a stylist nor as a man of letters in the truest sense of the word."⁴⁵ Probably Hearn had never read anything by Cooper.

Irving fared somewhat better than the other two. Hearn gave him a place of importance in English literature, rather than American. He praised Tales of the Alhambra as "that wonderful collection of magical tales . . . which has all the charm of 'The Arabian Nights.'" In commenting on Irving's tales and sketches in general, he showed independence of opinion, if not soundness of judgment, by selecting one of the less well known tales as Irving's best--"The Adelantado of the Seven Cities; or the Phantom Island," from Wolfert's Roost and Other Papers: "In spite of all the critics, and of popular judgment, I hold it to be the best of Irving's short stories." He remarked that Irving's histories have been superseded by later works. "The main value of Irving," he concluded, "for the student of English literature is altogether in his short stories," classics that are a part of any one's literary education.⁴⁶

The New England Tradition

Emerson and Hawthorne

Emerson died on April 27, 1882, and three days later appeared Hearn's obituary critique in the New Orleans Times-Democrat. In looking over a collection of portraits of American writers, Hearn remarked that Emerson's face "defied description" and exerted an indescribable "sympathetic fascination." He recognized Emerson's wide influence but noted also that his works were slow to sell. As to his philosophy, he was the "great Architect of modern thought." "To many he is a Sinaitic cloud, from which the lightnings of thought play forth only at intervals." His thought had

⁴⁵Hearn, History of English Literature, p. 967.

⁴⁶Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from "Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 931-33. The Catalogue of the Hearn Library, pp. 18 and 31, lists three Irving titles: The Alhambra, and two volumes in the "Riverside Literature Series." There are no titles by Cooper.

no system, Hearn felt; it was simply a part of an infinite universe: "The vastly increased knowledge of what we do not know, has taught us to ignore the dogmas which are offered us as keys to unlock the adamantine gates of unfathomable mysteries." As a poet, Emerson would never be popular and might not even endure, Hearn observed, because of the difficulties and obscurities of his style.⁴⁷ The comments sound as if Hearn had done some reading of Emerson, but they do not show that he had any grasp of his thought. About a year later, a letter answering an inquiry about Buddhism in America, shows that he had not forgotten Emerson:

Buddhism only needs to be known to make its influence felt in America. I don't think that works like those of Sinnett, or Olcott's 'Buddhist Catechism' . . . will do any good. . . . But the higher Buddhism--that suggested by men like Emerson, John Weiss, etc.--will yet have an apostle. We shall live, I think, to see some strange things.⁴⁸

But a far more illuminating comment is given in a letter some ten years later. He wrote:

About Emerson. Last spring I got a pretty edition of him from H. M. & Co. and I digested him. He is only suggestive, but wondrously so at times, as in his poems. As a suggester he will always be great. The talk about his truisms must depend upon the knowledge of the speaker. Emerson will be large or small--commonplace or profound--according to the reader's knowledge of the thought of the age.⁴⁹

His final word on Emerson was given to his Japanese students some five or six years later; at that time, as in former comments, he complained of the obscurity of his style--his style was "a natural eloquence in which a great deal of ore remains crude." But still Emerson, he admitted, was "one of the greatest figures in the history of American thought."⁵⁰ Hearn scarcely so much as gave passing notice to Emerson's friend and follower, Henry David Thoreau.⁵¹ This was indeed unfortunate, for a thorough knowledge

⁴⁷Summarized from Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 83-86.

⁴⁸To the Rev. W. D. Ball, 1883, in Writings, XIII, 257-58. The Olcott mentioned here, not to be confused with A. B. Olcott, is Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), author of a book called Buddhist Catechism and published by the Theosophical Press in 1885. (See U.S. Catalogue.)

⁴⁹To Hendrick, December, 1894, in Writings, XIV, 300.

⁵⁰"Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, p. 974. See also, On Poetry, pp. 122, 401-402.

⁵¹In a discussion on Cowper, Hearn makes a superficial

of Thoreau's life and work would have increased Hearn's respect for American letters. He would have found much to bolster his own distrust and hatred of the middle-class philosophy of industrial exploitation. But in the ruthless march of industrialism Thoreau's star was in eclipse.⁵² In ignoring him, Hearn was only reflecting, as in other instances, the spirit of the times.

Since Hearn was so thoroughly a follower of Poe, it might be supposed that he would bestow a modicum of praise on one to whom Poe gave unstinted praise. The evidence, however, does not show any extended or devoted interest in Hawthorne. Not until we come to the "Notes on American Literature," late in Hearn's teaching career, is Hawthorne even mentioned. There, though more space is given to Hawthorne than to any other writer except Poe, it is about half taken up with a discussion of American "ideal communities." Hearn opened his discussion--after stating once again the indiscretion of publishing all of a writer's work--with a contrast of Poe and Hawthorne: "What was strikingly deficient in Poe was the moral sense; and Hawthorne had too much of the moral sense--so much of it that it glooms all his work more or less, and gives sombre touches to his happiest pages." Hearn deplored what he termed the lack of romantic freedom in Hawthorne and said his imagination is "recognizably the imagination of Puritan New England." Of The House of the Seven Gables he said: "It does not come up to the fine merit of the other romances." He called The Scarlet Letter "the most gloomy of the writer's books,--although, for some strange reason, most popular." But, The Marble Faun is "the best of the four" romances. "Hawthorne intended in this story," he said, "to suggest the history of the emotional nature of the Latin races in contradiction to the cold and self-suppressed character of the races of the north."⁵³

comparison of the interest in nature and relative religious beliefs of Cowper and Thoreau (On Poets, p. 464). The Catalogue of the Hearn Library lists one little volume of Thoreau selections in the "Riverside Literature Series."

⁵²V. L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. II, The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860 (New York, 1927), p. 413. See also, Hubbell, American Life in Literature, I, 527.

⁵³Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 950-53.

Analyzing the Blithedale Romance, Hearn took occasion to mention the "extravagant, impossible" dreams of Fourier. But he was not surprised that such ideas would take root in America, since "American existence has long been a tolerably dismal affair." Brook Farm seemed to him the most sensible kind of communism yet attempted; but even so, he saw ample reason, from a philosophical standpoint, for its failure:

Human society as it now exists is as good as it is possible for human society to be under the circumstances, and you can not improve it. Moral and intellectual life are as rich as human experience has been able to make them, and you can not improve human experience. All society, all morality, all cultivation is a natural growth; and nothing attempted in the way of living at variance with, and independently of such growth, can be natural or successful. Evolutional philosophy proves this very plain.⁵⁴

Again, as had happened many times with Hearn, the philosophy of Herbert Spencer came to his aid in explaining both life and literature. Surprisingly enough, Hearn mentioned but one of Hawthorne's fine short stories--"Rappaccini's Daughter," which he called "a very great bit of art." "If you read this story," he said, "you have read the very best pages of Hawthorne."⁵⁵

One can but wonder why Hearn was not attracted to the skeptical and analytical mind, and to the fine style, of Hawthorne. Hearn's dislike of New England had something to do with it; because of what he thought Hawthorne's narrow Puritan background, he considered Hawthorne too "moral" and too imaginatively cramped. But the chief reason, no doubt, is that the realistic skepticism of Hawthorne failed to make an emotional appeal to Hearn. It should be noted, in this connection, that the romantic charm of Old Salem, for instance, that would have fascinated Hearn was not the kind of romance that Hawthorne saw.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 957. Cf. Herbert Spencer, First Principles (4th ed.; New York, 1880), passim.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 959-60.

⁵⁶The Catalogue of the Hearn Library shows a number of volumes of Hawthorne's stories and sketches in the "Riverside Literature Series." One cannot of course be sure that Hearn read all of these volumes. The Catalogue lists a complete set, more than a hundred titles, in this "Riverside Series," indicating that Hearn had probably simply ordered the full set from the publishers at the time he was doing his teaching in Japan.

Longfellow and Whittier

Hearn at times viewed New England writers with such an envious eye as to warp his critical judgment; at other times, however, he was lavish in praise. For the two household poets, Longfellow and Whittier, he retained a lifelong admiration. Each of them was favored with special lectures at the Tokyo Imperial University, an honor accorded to fewer than a half dozen Americans.

It is probable that Longfellow was his first love among American authors,⁵⁷ and this affection scarcely waned from his youth up.⁵⁸ References in the letters show a continued intimate acquaintance with the poet's work.⁵⁹ The death of Longfellow on March 24, 1882, called forth a generous tribute in the Times-Democrat two days later.⁶⁰ Hearn said "his melodies were always the melodies that are eternal and immortally young--voices of forest and sea, whispers of winds and waves, murmurs of sunny life and mysterious echoes of the night." He called Longfellow "the greatest of American poets," and laid stress on his interpretations of foreign literatures: "As a translator, his faithfulness will evoke admiration for a hundred years. As an adapter, he has no rival." As for his descriptive powers, "Wordsworth never equalled Longfellow in describing the beauties of nature."⁶¹

When Longfellow's star had gone into eclipse at the end of the nineteenth century, Hearn was not ready to accept the judgment of his generation. The very title of his lecture--"On a Proper Estimate of Longfellow"--makes clear Hearn's championship of the beloved poet. "If we listened to the critics only," he

⁵⁷Bisland, in Writings, XIII, 30-31, quotes a letter from a fellow pupil of Hearn's at St. Cuthbert's, the Roman Catholic college at Ushaw, near Durham, to the effect that "Longfellow was one of his favorite poets, his beautiful imagery and felicity of expression appealing with peculiar force to a kindred soul." This was about 1864-1865.

⁵⁸To Chamberlain, in 1895, he wrote: "Even Longfellow cannot greatly thrill me now." (Writings, XIV, 357.) But his lecture, some years later, gives the lie to this expression.

⁵⁹Writings, XIII, 180, 195-96; XIV, 327; XVI, 189.

⁶⁰March 26, 1882, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 79-82.

⁶¹Ibid.

said, "we should very soon believe that there is nothing in the world which is good."⁶² Hearn said that the critics, however, "are only partly responsible" for the sudden reaction against Longfellow.⁶³ The temper of the age, the turn toward realism, are largely responsible. For "of all the poets of the age, none was so completely romantic as Longfellow, so ideal, so fond of the spiritual and the impossible." Hearn saw in Longfellow's versatility something of his own wide interests: "The great mass of his poetry refers neither to America nor to England, but to other parts of Europe." So had it been with Hearn's interests. Another quality meriting praise was Longfellow's ghostliness--"suggestion of the spirit behind the matter, the ghost beyond the reality." He called Longfellow a great educator because he introduced "new beauties and new values and new ideas" by drawing on many foreign sources. Again, we see the parallel with Hearn, who by translation, paraphrase, and retelling of old stories had enriched American literature. Longfellow, like Hearn, was a cosmopolitan character. Hearn said: "Longfellow is neither English nor American; at his best he is without nationality and without personal idiosyncrasy." Longfellow's poetic interpretations of grim nature seemed as good to Hearn as Doré's drawings. He particularly commended as accurate the Louisiana descriptions in Evangeline, though Longfellow had never been in Louisiana. Hearn himself had seen these regions and felt that the comparison of the primeval forest to old men with long white beards was essentially a just comparison, even though it had been disparaged by some famous critics. Hearn's purpose in this lecture, one of his most satisfactory commentaries on major authors, was to give a new emphasis to Longfellow's good qualities--his charming pictures, his ghost-like story-telling, his feeling for the beauty of the world--"looking everywhere for beauty and finding it everywhere," Hearn said, "and always indifferent as to whether it was Christian or pagan, domestic or foreign, old or new." So too had Hearn sought for beauty.⁶⁴

⁶²Hearn, On Poets, p. 776.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 744 f.

⁶⁴Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from Hearn, On Poets, pp. 744-76. In his "Notes on American Literature," History of English Literature, p. 927, Hearn reaffirmed his belief in Longfellow's greatness--"beyond all question the greatest American poet"--though, he admits, English critics would

Whittier too was an early love. "In spite of Hearn's devotion to the French romantics with their anti-puritan standards," says Mordell, "Hearn loved Whittier as he loved Longfellow."⁶⁵ When The Vision of Echard and Other Poems appeared in 1878, Hearn gave it an enthusiastic welcome in the New Orleans Item. He wrote:

No volume of American authorship has this year appeared which ranks so high, or merits so warm a welcome as this collection of charming poems. Never has the Quaker poet sung so sweetly; never has he uttered prayers more beautiful than these. That wonderful gift of melody--that song with never a discordant note,--that rhythmic flow, limpid and pure and strong, in which Whittier is unsurpassed, seems to mellow with years like good wine.⁶⁶

After some quotations, with favorable comments, he concluded with the statement that Whittier's religious poems "are not strictly orthodox"--and for that reason Hearn finds them sincere and likable. Some fifteen years later, writing to Chamberlain, he was puzzled to explain why Whittier held such a fascination for him. The clue may be found in Hearn's own analysis: "For the dear old man, no sect ever really existed, and his Christ was no Jew, but only a phantom Christ (representing the wish of the world to believe that goodness is divine, and that everything in this life will be righted)."⁶⁷ This reflects the romantic hope of Hearn, however questionable it may be as a characterization of Whittier.

In his extended lecture on Whittier, Hearn emphasized three things as significant in the poet's work: simplicity of form, tolerance and beauty of religious faith, and "democratic humanitarianism."⁶⁸ Whittier's poems, he told the students, charm "because of a particular tenderness and simple beauty--not because of any grand force of language, [or] any remarkable mas-

scarcely put him above the third class. In other lectures we find frequent reference to specific poems of Longfellow, showing Hearn's intimate knowledge. See On Poetry, pp. 95-97; 113-15; 227; 323; 380-81; 495; 536 ff.

⁶⁵Introduction, Essays on American Literature, p. xx.

⁶⁶December 4, 1878, in Mordell, *ibid.*, pp. 7-10. The year 1878 was not prolific in great works, but there were volumes by Bret Harte, Holmes, James, Longfellow, and Bayard Taylor--to mention a few writers whom Hearn generally praised (Selden L. Whitcomb, Chronological Outlines of American Literature [New York, 1893]).

⁶⁷Letter [of August 16, 1893], in Writings, XVI, 14.

⁶⁸These points find further emphasis in other lectures, in On Poetry, pp. 261-63, 383-85, 417.

tery of form. . . . Though not one of the greatest, he was a great singer in his own way and in his own kind." The simple beauty of Whittier's Quaker faith met no skepticism in Hearn: "The gentle Christianity of Whittier offended nobody, and pleased even that religious element most hostile to his sect." Hearn emphasized the poet's spirit of kindness and tolerance, his natural gift of a "more than common sense of beauty," but recognized too his "hatred of injustice," his courage in speaking opinions "without caring for the consequences." Further, on the question of beauty, Hearn said:

Whittier was a true artist in this sense,--that beauty, moral beauty, was always beauty for him--no matter where it came from. He found pleasure in translating the poetry of other faiths than his own,--Indian, Arabian, even African. All religions that expressed trust in the unseen, and taught morality, were to that extent for Whittier, beautiful and true.

Hearn saw a greater tenderness and breadth of view in Whittier than in Wordsworth. The latter, he said, "was a little afraid of religious prejudice--afraid to express all his thought unless he could make it accord with accepted doctrines." Hearn expressed a preference for Whittier's verses on pre-existence, setting "A Mystery" above the famous "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality." Whittier's religious sentiment, once again he insisted, is "not orthodox, perhaps; but it is excellent teaching wherever uttered--in whatever language or country."⁶⁹

The simple beauty of Whittier's poems about common humanity found a sympathetic response in Hearn. His highest art found expression in his verse tales. Compared with Tennyson, he was less a master of language, but a greater master of the human heart. As illustration, Hearn quoted in full "Maude Muller," and called it "the greatest of Whittier's contributions to abiding literature. It would be very difficult to overpraise it." Not its verse form, nor its story, but its humanity is its chief value. It has, he said, a "kind of democratic humanitarianism."⁷⁰

⁶⁹Summary and quotations from "Notes on Whittier," in Hearn, On Poets, pp. 777-99. The Catalogue of the Hearn Library, pp. 18-19 and 30-33, lists volumes of the complete poetical works of both Whittier and Longfellow, as well as some twenty volumes of selections of the two in the "Riverside Literature Series."

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 799.

Holmes and Lowell

The remaining two major poets of the New England group, Holmes and Lowell, are allowed scant attention by Hearn. Lowell is mentioned briefly in the "Notes on American Literature."⁷¹ Hearn stated his "conviction that the position of James Russell Lowell has been very much exaggerated," though he wrote some good Yankee dialect poems and a "great number of very fair poems." Lowell enjoyed popularity in England, but, said Hearn, it was due to his charming manners rather than to his merits as a writer.⁷²

Holmes fared somewhat better than Lowell in the estimation of Hearn, who looked upon him as the antithesis of Hawthorne: "No more cheerful, light, sparkling mind ever appeared in America," he told his students.⁷³ His broad outlook on life Hearn attributed in large part to his long study in France and his training in science.⁷⁴ The detailed comments on the *Autocrat*⁷⁵ show his familiarity with that famous philosopher and call forth unstinted praise of Holmes for diversity of interests, cheerful optimism, and liberal spirit. He remarked: "There was no religious nonsense about Dr. Holmes;--he hated the cant and the hypocrisy of the New England spirit, and made himself its open enemy from the beginning. . . ." The universal appeal of Holmes was that "everybody who reads him even today will find some of his own faults or weaknesses or prejudices or hobbies, beautifully dissected or gently ridiculed. . . . He was a physician of souls as well as of bodies," and gave to his readers a moral tonic. Hearn called *Elsie Venner* "one of the most extraordinary novels of the 19th century." After giving rather full details of the story, he praised the fine char-

⁷¹Hearn, History of English Literature, p. 968. The Catalogue of the Hearn Library, p. 18, shows that Hearn owned a copy of the Biglow Papers during his American days.

⁷²Hearn, On Poetry, pp. 353-57 and 571-72, made two references to Lowell and quoted parts of two poems.

⁷³"Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, p. 960.

⁷⁴Hearn, On Art, Literature and Philosophy, pp. 449-51.

⁷⁵The Catalogue of the Hearn Library, pp. 18, 28, 32, shows three copies of the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table.

acter drawing in the book, pointing out that the New England people are taken from actual observation: "They live," said Hearn; "they are very real, and proclaim their creator a great master." Hearn gave little attention here to Holmes's poetry, but mentioned "The Last Leaf" as one of his best studies.⁷⁶

Storm-Center of the Gilded Age: Walt Whitman

Hearn's vituperative interpretation of Walt Whitman is one of the most interesting, if most mistaken, of his literary studies. This famous attack is the most scathing he made against any author, not excepting his strictures on Zola. Comparatively speaking, he unduly stressed the significance of Poe and greatly underestimated the significance of Whitman. Of course he was not alone in his attitude: his criticism centered, in the main, on the two points that more famous critics--not to mention the general reading public--objected to in Whitman; that is, unacceptable form and unacceptable subject matter.

Hearn's first and most vehement attack, printed in the Times-Democrat of July 30, 1882, was called forth, presumably, by the appearance in Philadelphia of the tenth edition (1882) of the Leaves of Grass. He called the work an "eccentric, tiresome, flatulent, raw volume of rhapsodies." He especially denounced "the scoriac deposit of the lava-flow of lust, that orgiastic out-pouring of coarseness entitled Children of Adam. . . . Even granting that Walt Whitman has immense genius, lofty sentiment, artistic strength--which we cannot--the Children of Adam would condemn him beyond redemption." Hearn objected to Whitman's method of presentation, not, he said, to his frankness or his praise of the theme of love. He classed Whitman, therefore, with the Naturalists, who, he said, are not artists:

They describe only that which is; they are mere dissectors when they are not mere photographers . . . by disgusting people with what is, they hope to inspire them with a thirst for what is not! They are the Nihilists of literature.

This method Hearn could not commend, for "the duty of art is to elevate our conceptions . . . to create ideals . . ." and he

⁷⁶Summary and quotations from "Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 960-66. In another lecture Hearn quoted from "To an Insect," praising it for "wit and curiousness of the subject" (On Poetry, pp. 405-407).

was sure that Whitman had no such high purpose. "The result [in Whitman's work] is more or less disgusting;--it is like a navy trying to model nudities out of mud!" Hearn pointed out that Swinburne's muse is in some respects more immoral than Whitman's, "but her nudity is of the grand antique sort and her dancing graceful. . . . But Mr. Whitman's muse is at once indecent and ugly, lascivious and gawky, lubricious and coarse." He commented particularly on the poem "I Sing the Body Electric" as a specimen of Whitman's lubricity. His objection, then, is rather on the ground of taste than of immorality.⁷⁷

Hearn concluded his scathing essay with a few comments of damnable faint praise. The passage is worth quoting in full:

There are pages of force and rough beauty; there is originality, depth, strong feeling. The book is not the creation of a literary quack. It is the work of an honest man,--rude in his conceptions, reckless in his expressions, erroneous occasionally in his deductions, eccentric, erratic, inartistic, enthusiastic, dogmatic likewise. What he writes he believes to be good and beautiful. Some agree with him. We do not. We hold much of his book to be infamous according to the universal code of ethics; and contrary to all just standards of taste; largely shapeless, nebulous--with here and there an appearance of bright and solid nuclei. Leaves of Grass may be preserved awhile by curiosity, like ferns in a mantel-vase;--but they will crumble away, withered by public contempt or indifference, just so soon as curiosity has been satiated.⁷⁸

Hearn was not to escape censure for his strong statements. The next year we find him writing a long letter⁷⁹ to William D. O'Connor, Whitman's belligerent champion, explaining half-apologetically his views on Whitman. O'Connor had made Hearn a present of his little book on Whitman. One almost suspects Hearn of a subtly ironic thrust in his deferential reply: "I had imagined you as a delicate amateur only; I did not recognize in you a Master." Then follows his explanation, a somewhat discerning criticism, far juster to Whitman than his newspaper article of the previous year. Hearn could not allow Whitman's work the lofty estimate that O'Connor gave it; he objected now on the ground of form:

The thing created must be beautiful; it does not satisfy me if the material be rich. I cannot content myself with ores and rough jewels. I want to see the gold purified and wrought

⁷⁷Summary and quotations are from Hearn's editorial on "Leaves of Grass," in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature pp. 91-95.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 95. ⁷⁹Six pages, as printed in Writings.

into marvellous fantastic shapes as by Greek cunning into faultless witchery of nude loveliness. And Whitman's gold seems to me in the ore: his diamonds and emeralds in the rough. . . . Did not all the Titans of antique literature polish their lines, chisel their words, according to severest laws of art?

But Whitman has failed to do that, Hearn said, and therefore misses the "front rank" of poets. His Titanic voice is "the voice of the giant beneath the volcano--half stifled, half uttered--roaring be- times because articulation is impossible." The beauty in the work, he thought, is too hard to find. He called Whitman a "bar- baric singer." His songs are "like the improvisations of a savage skald." They represent the work of a precursor, the work from which great art comes, but are themselves not likely to endure. The most striking feature of Hearn's letter, however, is the re- traction of his statement about Whitman's subject matter. He wrote:

What charms me, however, is that which is most earthy and of the earth. . . . Now it is just the animalism of the work which constitutes its great force to me--not a brutal animal- ism, but a human animalism, such as the thoughts of antique poets reveal to us: the inexplicable delight of being, the intoxication of perfect health, the unutterable pleasure of breathing mountain wind. . . . He is rude, joyous, fearless, artless--a singer who knows nothing of musical law, but whose voice is as the voice of Pan. . . . [He is an] antique syl- van deity.⁸⁰

But Hearn did not have the courage to express such views in the daily press. He admitted to O'Connor that he "secretly admired Whitman" but did not care to express his opinion "in pub- lic print." "The proprietors always tell you," he said, "to re- member that their paper 'goes into respectable families,' or ac- cuse you of loving obscene literature if you attempt controversy." Though given a good deal of freedom in his newspaper contributions, and though it would seem he did not care to risk his berth by too frank admiration, the more likely answer here is that Hearn was bowing to O'Connor, commending O'Connor's defense, in The Good Gray Poet, of the cause of "poetical liberty" and "mental free- dom."⁸¹

O'Connor evidently was not entirely pacified; he must

⁸⁰Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from the letter to O'Connor, August, 1883, in Writings, XIII, 263-69.

⁸¹Ibid., passim.

have wanted a complete surrender, for in Hearn's next letter we find him writing: "If Symonds praises Whitman, I stand reprov'd for my least doubts; for he is the very apostle of classicism and form."⁸² And somewhat later he further explained: "You did not quite understand my allusion to the Bible. I wished to imply that it was when W. W.'s verses approached that Biblical metre in form, etc., that we most admired him."⁸³

A few years later, the inquisitive Gould was asking Hearn for his views on Whitman. Hearn wrote from his retreat in Saint-Pierre, Martinique:

You ask about my idea of Whitman. I have not patience for him--not as for Emerson. Enormous suggestiveness in both, rather than clear utterance. . . . Then there is a shagginess, an uncouthness, a Calibanishness about Whitman that repels. He makes me think of some gigantic dumb being that sees things, and wants to make others see them and cannot for want of a finer means of expression than Nature gives him. But there is manifest the rude nobility of the man--the primitive and patriarchal soul-feeling to men and the world. Whitman lays a Cyclopean foundation on which, I fancy, some wonderful architect will yet build up some marvellous thing.⁸⁴

In a postscript Hearn added that his idea of Whitman "is not consciously stable." He recognized the value of the "something" which Whitman felt but could not express.

After going to Japan, Hearn was aware of Whitman's growing reputation, though his own opinion was little altered by that gradual growth. In the series of lectures on the history of English literature there are several references to Whitman, comparing him, always in a derogatory manner, with some other writer. Commenting on the vogue of Ossian, Hearn said: "The whole thing was a craze--much like the modern craze on the subject of the Poet Whitman," who like Ossian was merely suggestive but gave nothing.⁸⁵ Discussing the music of Coleridge's verse, he said: "If that American eccentric Whitman had been able to produce a beautiful effect we could not justly condemn his form, but the trouble with such

⁸²In 1883, in Writings, XIII, 286.

⁸³Again to W. D. O'Connor, March, 1884, in Writings, XIII, 313-14.

⁸⁴Letter to Dr. George M. Gould, August, 1888, in Writings, XIV, 58-59.

⁸⁵Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 418-19.

men is that they have neither the power to produce the effect of music nor the power to produce emotional beauty."⁸⁶ In analyzing unfavorably the freedom of form in some of Southey's verses, he said: "From this kind of freedom, to the absurdity of Walt Whitman, is only a short step."⁸⁷ Hearn was not yet ready for free verse.

One of his longest discussions of an American writer (it must have been a series of lectures!), one given over to Whitman, was mainly to warn students against the Whitman influence.⁸⁸ In spite of the correspondence with O'Connor, the lecture was in many ways a more withering denunciation than the article which he wrote about sixteen or eighteen years earlier. He centered his attack almost exclusively on Whitman's form-- or lack of form. Emerson and Swinburne had praised Whitman immoderately, Hearn thought, for they were not able to quote from Whitman "anything to justify such delight in his work." Both fulsome praise and sharp abuse have been "utter nonsense," and Hearn proposed to take the middle ground, like Professor Gosse, and tell the truth about Whitman. He compared Whitman's form to "coffee-pictures," nebulous clouds, and ink stains--on which one can use the imagination and assume that the unformed "picture" can mean anything one wishes it to mean. So have the admirers of Whitman done: his work suggests "different fancies to different minds." But Hearn could not accept this kind of "formless" writing: Leaves of Grass being written in neither verse nor prose "must have been written contrary to all rules of grammar in all languages against all rules of correct expression, all rules of verse, all rules of prose construction, all rules of good taste" Hearn did not wish to be thought narrow in literary matters; in fact, he insisted that he believed in "the most absolute liberty." But the experience of the race, he said, has established rules which ought to be respected; and the writer who does not or cannot respect them must be "something of a brute, and an animal or at the very best an ignorant savage." What Whitman has given us, he said, "represents the condition of language in a time before grammar." And he scored the poet for "living a savage life in the

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 552-53. ⁸⁷Ibid., p. 569.

⁸⁸"Walt Whitman," in Hearn, On Poets, pp. 817-41.

midst of nineteenth century civilization"--something Hearn might, out of sympathy and in complete honesty, have praised him for! He belabored Whitman for his lack of education, but he did not condemn any one for using "the language of the common people." He praised its use in Kipling and Burns and wholly accepted Emerson's dictum that "the language of the street is much more forcible and eloquent than the language of universities." But Whitman's language is something of a hybrid, Hearn complained; it is neither that of the educated nor of the common people. What he wrote being without form and "utterly shapeless, it is nonsense to call it poetry." Hearn even went so far as to say that if there was anything resembling form in Whitman, it was "accidental and unintentional," for he had "no ear for the music of English poetry!"⁸⁹

After these sharp animadversions, Hearn proposed to talk about the "good side of the man." But Whitman fared little better in Hearn's attempt to find his good qualities. He disagreed with those who called Whitman indecent and irreligious. Whitman tried to read the meaning of the universe, he said, but "his mind did not have the strength" to digest all he read. Hearn condescendingly said: "Now there is something very touching in the history of this poor simple man, this common working man, trying to tell the world what he thought and felt, and quite ignorant of the proper way to do it" He called "Song of Myself," from which he quoted a few stanzas, "a great piece of stuttering only." He grudgingly admitted that Whitman was trying to express something of the evolutionary philosophy and "such philosophy of Individualism as was uttered by Emerson and Carlyle." He said Whitman's democratic utterances were of interest, but that he went too far in accepting all kinds and classes of people on an equal basis. He commended Whitman's frank treatment of sex, saying it was an advance over the "false modesty and the hypocrisy of the New England school of morals." His final thrust was that Whitman is "not worth reading twice."⁹⁰

These comments on Whitman, in the New Orleans press, in

⁸⁹Summary and quotations from ibid. Incidentally, Hearn remarked in the opening of his discussion that he had given a lecture on Whitman "three years ago." But no other discussion is given in Complete Lectures.

⁹⁰Summary and quotations are from ibid.

letters, and in later lectures, indicate that Hearn had probably read most of Leaves of Grass and some of the Whitman criticism, that he favored the adverse criticisms, and that his view had become no more tolerant nor understanding as time passed, in spite of Whitman's steadily growing reputation. The statement to Gould in 1888 that his idea of Whitman was "not consciously stable" is in a measure true, but there is also a suspicious note of hypocrisy in some of his utterances. His Times-Democrat denunciation was no doubt a reflection of popular squeamishness and prudery; and when taken to task by O'Connor, Hearn had not the courage, nor the conviction, it seems evident, to uphold his published statements. Moreover, in order to pacify the contentious O'Connor, he went further in retraction than he really believed; and we are forced to conclude that with reference to Whitman he was essentially a dishonest critic. Even so, there is evident a consistency in Hearn's dislike of Whitman, early and late. For Whitman failed, from Hearn's reading of him, to exhibit those qualities, as Hearn conceived them, that meant great art: he lacked the beauty of form; he did not express an inner truth and therefore failed to ennoble the feelings of mankind; his choice of naturalism and the naturalistic method reflected life too much in the raw. So Hearn understood him; or, rather, misunderstood him. What Hearn missed, and should not have missed, was that Whitman was a rebel like himself; that he denounced more outspokenly than Hearn did, American materialism, political and commercial corruption; that Whitman, like himself, was an ardent evolutionist of the Spencer school. And there was a romantic idealism in Whitman far more pervasive and profound than in Hearn; but because of his acceptance of the popular trend and his holding to a too narrow idea of beauty of form in poetry, Hearn missed the fundamental qualities of Whitman's poetry. What Mordell says of the 1882 newspaper article might very well apply also to Hearn's reasoned and final judgment of "the good gray poet": "It was unfair, ill-tempered and unworthy of the writer who had much in common after all with Whitman in his attacks on puritanism, bourgeois civilization, and devotion to pantheistic ideas" ⁹¹

⁹¹Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, Introduction, p. xvii.

Letter-Day Giants: James, Twain, and Howells

Of writers whose reputations like Hearn's were being made in the eighteen-seventies through the eighteen-nineties, there were not more than three of major stature whom he seriously noticed. Of these, Henry James received passing complimentary notices, sometimes indirect, in Hearn's letters. In the early eighteen-eighties he wrote his friend Krehbiel saying: "I am glad you think I am improving. Henry James says a fine prose writer rarely reveals himself before thirty-five."⁹² Writing to Gould from Saint-Pierre, he praised James as critic: "I suspect James has not his equal as a literary chemist; the analyses of his French contemporary, Lemaitre, are far less qualitative. You have made me know him as a critic;--I had only known him as a novelist."⁹³ Complaining to his friend Chamberlain of a world gone machine-mad, he wrote: "James lives only as a marvellous psychologist, and he has to live and make his characters live on the Continent."⁹⁴ In another letter, again to Chamberlain, he put James among America's greatest living writers.⁹⁵ He repeated the idea to Ellwood Hendrick a few years later.⁹⁶ Writing to another of his friends in Japan, Mitchell McDonald, in 1898, he said: "There is no American to compare with Kipling in the market, except Henry James and Marion Crawford, [but] James is too fine and delicate a writer--a psychological analyst of the most complex society--ever to become popular."⁹⁷ And again, to the same correspondent, he wrote that James was the only man strong enough to depict the society in which he lived--"but his special study is society."⁹⁸ These occasional remarks indicate that Hearn read James with some appre-

⁹²"Letters of a Poet to a Musician. Lafcadio Hearn to Henry E. Krehbiel," The Critic, XLVIII (1906), 315.

⁹³Letter of October, 1888, in Writings, XIV, 59-60.

⁹⁴Letter of December 14, 1893, ibid., XVI, 84.

⁹⁵Letter of October 25, 1894, ibid., p. 274.

⁹⁶Letter of May, 1896, ibid., XV, 31.

⁹⁷Letter of April, 1898, ibid., p. 110.

⁹⁸Letter of October, 1898, ibid., p. 130.

ciation. Lecturing to his Tokyo students, he compared James and Howells, with only the very highest praise for the former: "James is never commonplace. In my opinion [he] is by far the greatest of living American writers. . . . Almost anything he has written is worthy of study"--but he warned that James was not easy reading.⁹⁹

The fact that Hearn should have some appreciation of writers so opposite in culture, artistic methods, and ideals as James and Mark Twain, speaks favorably for his catholicity of taste. But there are no occasional comments in the letters on Twain, nor did he give the great humorist any word in his all-too-few lectures in Japan on American writers.¹⁰⁰ One of Hearn's "fantas-tics," called "A River Reverie," gives us an interesting glimpse of Mark Twain in 1882. Hearn drew, for him, a realistic picture of the old river town with its busy wharves, its men of the river-front, and the colorful boats that ply the waters. He explained the occasion of the reverie:

. . . . there came an illustrious visitor to us, who reminded us of all these things. . . . Today his name is a household word in the English-speaking world; his thoughts have been translated into other tongues; his written wit creates mirth at once in Paris salons and in New Zealand homes.¹⁰¹

Fortune has favored him, Hearn said, and he has hobnobbed with the great ones of the world. But he has not lost his "cheery manner" and the "keenness of his pilot's glance." A year later, when Life on the Mississippi was published, Hearn wrote an appreciative editorial in the Times-Democrat. Hearn saw in the book something more than simple humor:

Notwithstanding its lively spirit of fun, the volume is a more serious creation by far than The Innocents Abroad; and in some respects seems to us the most solid book that Mark Twain has written. Certainly the first two hundred and fifty pages possess a large historical value; and will be referred to in future years as trustworthy paintings of manners, customs, and social phases which have already been much changed, and will doubtless, before another generation, belong alto-

⁹⁹"Notes on American Literature," in Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 971-72. Hearn was probably reading James in the current periodicals, especially the Atlantic, for the Catalogue of the Hearn Library does not show any James titles.

¹⁰⁰The Catalogue shows no Mark Twain titles in the Hearn library in Japan.

¹⁰¹Editorial of May 2, 1882, in Writings, II, 347-51.

gether to the past.¹⁰²

Hearn enjoyed the delight and sparkle of Twain's humor, but praised as more significant "the realistic history of piloting," which no other author was so well fitted to record as Twain. He remarked again on Twain's great popularity. Time has not altered the truth of this discerning editorial.

Hearn approached Howells' work with mixed feelings; sometimes he praised, but more often he censured. Because he recognized and respected Howells' position of power as an Eastern magazine editor, some of his comments undoubtedly grew out of a feeling of petty jealousy. But a good part of his criticism, it seems, was animated by honest disagreement with Howells' methods as a novelist and his judgments as a critic.¹⁰³ In the eighteen-nineties he wrote Krehbiel, who had gone to New York as a music critic to cultivate the acquaintance of Howells, "the subtlest and noblest literary mind in this country. . . . [He] will aid you in climbing Parnassus, not for selfish motives, but for pure art's sake."¹⁰⁴ Hearn had not yet met Howells, but he recognized his power in the world of letters.¹⁰⁵

Within the space of a year (1886-1887), three essays appeared in the Times-Democrat on Howells, in all of which Hearn not merely disagreed with Howells, but wrote with a marked asperity. In the first of these Hearn took issue with Howells about

¹⁰²May 20, 1883, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 127-33.

¹⁰³For instance, after some years in Japan he wrote Chamberlain saying: "I don't like Howell's [sic] books because I detest the kind of people he writes about." (Letter of June 25, 1893, in Writings, XV, 452.)

¹⁰⁴Letter of June, 1886, in Writings, XIII, 326.

¹⁰⁵Henry J. Harper, The House of Harper (New York, 1912), p. 586, relates an interesting episode of the meeting of Howells and Hearn, at a dinner for literary people, given by Harper in January, 1889: "After we had taken our places at the table William D. Howells, who sat on my left, pointed out Hearn and asked me who he was. I reminded him that I had introduced them to each other, and said, 'You surely know who Lafcadio Hearn is.' Howells jumped up from his chair, and going round to Hearn, took his hand and remarked that the name of Hearn meant nothing to him, but that there was only one Lafcadio Hearn, and that he felt so pleased to meet him that he was impelled to shake hands with him again--a graceful act and one highly appreciated by Hearn." Tinker, American Days, pp. 323-24, also recounts this incident.

the "sins of genius." Howells had said that the greater the genius the greater his morality should be. Hearn thought the opposite more likely to be the case, since a development in one line does not mean a corresponding development in another; in fact, it may mean a weakening in another. At any rate, Hearn said, we want to judge what the man said rather than what he is: if the man's work is worthy of admiration, his character--however bad--should not dispel that admiration. Hearn said the immoral character of a shoemaker, for instance, is no good reason for not wearing a pair of shoes well made by him. Likewise:

Vicious and brilliant authors are not usually honored on account of occasional immoralities in their work, but on account of truths and beauties to be discerned in it. . . . To demand that all men of genius should live perfectly placid and passionless lives is about as reasonable as to demand the advent of the Millennium. Absolute moral uniformity is neither to be expected nor wished for philosophically speaking, in any class of men.

From this disagreement on the sins of genius, Hearn took occasion to thrust at Howells' realism and his criticism, stating that in the former he suppressed all emotion, enthusiasm, and natural feeling; and though he had had great success as a novelist, that fact had not necessarily been in his favor as a critic. Hearn said:

His power of criticism is limited to Sunday-school standards, --good and respectable standards in their way, but never intended for the measurement of centuries and civilizations. . . . [His early work] shows that he never possessed the imaginative faculty to any remarkable degree.¹⁰⁶

The second of the essays, a discussion of Howells' kind of realism, takes Howells to task for objecting to "all sorts of fiction, except that written by himself and Mr. James." Hearn thought Howells did not like Charles Egbert Craddock's work because she was not a realist--she let her fancy work upon her material: "He evidently labors under the belief that a mind like Miss Murfree's first receives its impressions just in the same colorless way that Mr. Howells' mind does." Hearn went on to say that the genuine artist is the one who sees things differently from the common person--he gets what may be termed the artistic impression. "Miss Murfree is an artist in this sense; Mr. Howells is

¹⁰⁶Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from "Sins of Genius," New Orleans Times-Democrat, June 6, 1886, in Mordell (ed.), Essays on American Literature, pp. 189-93.

not." Hearn said there is a "spirit of neo-Puritanism" in Howells' inspiration, which presents his truth in a very limited way, fostering a brand of "false realism which adopts its own imperfect ways of seeing and thinking as a universal standard whereby to judge all literary work."¹⁰⁷

The third essay discussed Howells on critics and finds Hearn half-chuckling over Howells' complaint that the critics are too severe on him. When Howells argued that the business of criticism was to classify and analyze, and ascertain the facts of literature, not to praise or blame, Hearn pointed out that he did not follow his own advice. He said: "While he remained the powerful novelist only, he received more meed of unadulterated praise than most living writers can boast of. . . . It was only when he put himself forward as a critic of the work of others, that he excited hostility." Hearn censured his intolerance of opinion in "ridiculing idealism and condemning romanticism in all shapes and forms." If Howells thought criticism was futile, Hearn asked, why did he oppose idealism and champion a new school? The essay closes with the opinion that Howells has proved himself to be a "clumsy literary controversialist."¹⁰⁸

In the "Notes on American Literature," some years later in Japan, Hearn mentioned Howells as a realistic writer "celebrated throughout the English-speaking world." In spite of this wide acclaim, there is little evidence that Hearn had altered his opinion of previous years. Howells' appeal, he said, was to "the great mediocrity." The characters and the scenes of the novels are invariably commonplace; the people are tiresome; the incidents are uninteresting.¹⁰⁹

Albert Mordell, compiler of Hearn's essays, sees in Hearn's comment on Howells a piece of pioneer work in criticism. He commends Hearn highly for taking issue with the chief critic of the eighteen-eighties; he assumes that the present generation is in-

¹⁰⁷Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from "One of Mr. Howells' Realisms," New Orleans Times-Democrat, April 12, 1887, in ibid., pp. 238-40.

¹⁰⁸Summary and quotations throughout the paragraph are from "Howells on Critics," Times-Democrat, May 29, 1887, in ibid., pp. 248-50.

¹⁰⁹Hearn, History of English Literature, pp. 970-71.

clined to agree with Hearn, who "rejected Howells's conception of realism for the very reasons it has been repudiated in our day"--because it was superficial and not genuine realism.¹¹⁰ Mordell, however, does not see the full import of Hearn's thinking. If Howells had been a more thoroughgoing realist, it is likely that Hearn would have condemned him as following too closely the school of naturalism. It is important here that we do not overlook Hearn's petty jealousy. He wanted very much to "make" the Eastern magazines, and he had not yet succeeded. And further, there is evident a bit of sectional jealousy in his attitude toward the ruling Eastern critics. True, he was in fundamental disagreement with Howells' materials and methods, but there is more to the picture than just that.

¹¹⁰Introduction to the Essays on American Literature, pp. ix-xi.

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